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CIA Response Asked In Use of Swine Virus

By Carole Agus

Sen. Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii), the head of the Select Committee on Intelligence, submitted a formal inquiry yesterday to George Bush, the head of the Central Intelligence Agency, asking for verification or denial of reports that African swine fever virus was introduced into Cuba in 1971 with at least the tacit approval of the CIA.

The report was part of a Newsday investigation that included admissions by members of the U.S. Intelligence community that they participated in the transport of a sealed container of virus from a U.S. Army base and CIA training ground in Panama to Cuba with the help of paid anti-Castro terrorists. The breakout of the disease forced the Cuban government to halt all production of pork, a Cuban staple, in 1971, and forced the slaughter of 500,000 pigs to prevent an epidemic.

The CIA has neither confirmed nor denied the report in answer to reporters' questions. A Defense Department spokesman who was asked to comment, said, "I doubt you'll get comment from anybody," explaining, "Well, it's either a half-assed story or it's totally true, which is terrible, but either way I'll get back to you." He did not elaborate, and he did not return the call yesterday.

Inouye said of the report, "Frankly, it's unbelievable. I would just hope that we had better sense than that. I don't want to suggest what is wrong. I don't want to assume that it did happen, but I think what is wrong is obvious. We have pigs also. I don't want the assumption to be made that we suspect the agencies," he said. He explained that if he determined that any illegal action had been taken by a government agency, the Justice Department would be contacted. He said a decision would be reached on what, if any, action the intelligence committee would take after he gets a response from Bush.

Rep. Otis Pike (D-Riverhead), former chairman of the House Select Committee on Intelligence and a member of the House Armed Services Committee, said he would reintroduce a bill to give Congress knowledge of intelligence activities and approval of others.

The introduction of the virus into Cuba in 1971 took place two years after Richard Nixon ordered that biological and chemical weapons be destroyed and committed the U.S. government to support a United Nations protocol—a treaty-type agreement—prohibiting bacteriological methods of warfare. UN officials said yesterday that if the Cuban government considered the action to be a breach of international peace and security, it could bring the matter before the UN Security Council, but that so far, no such action had been taken. The Cuban Foreign Affairs Ministry in Havana would not accept calls because they were placed in the United States.

Then-CIA director Richard Helms testified before the Senate Select Committee in 1975 that the CIA did not disclose to the National Security Council that it had stocks of biological weapons—although the council had been specifically charged by the President to investigate the matter. He also testified that when the White House issued a directive ordering a halt in military production of toxins, the CIA official who had custody of the weapons was never told about it because the order itself was "classified secret."

"Certainly you are not testifying that a document of this character cannot go to the very people to whom it is directed, in effect, the people who had custody of the very toxins that the President ordered destroyed?" Helms was asked.

"Well sir, I am sorry," Helms said.

Spokesmen for the White House and for President-elect Jimmy Carter would not comment. Helms, now ambassador to Iran, could not be reached.